

US Defense Secretary warns of “Pearl Harbor” cyber attack by Iran

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In a speech before defense industry executives, US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta used the outbreak of a computer virus at two energy companies in the Middle East to warn that the United States and its allies faced a threat equivalent to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks or the Japanese bombardment of Pearl Harbor in 1941.

Panetta was the guest of honor Thursday at a New York City dinner organized by the trade group Business Executives for National Security, a lobbying front for military contractors. His comments followed an alleged cyber attack against the Saudi Arabian state oil company, Aramco, as well as Qatari natural gas company, Rasgas.

Officials in the two US-backed Persian Gulf monarchies said that a virus called Shamoon was used in the attacks, which rapidly spread through the two companies’ networks, overwriting and wiping out files on 30,000 computers. Panetta revealed in his speech that the virus had replaced Aramco files with an image of a burning US flag.

“These attacks mark a significant escalation of the cyber threat,” Panetta said. “And they have renewed concerns about still more destructive scenarios that could unfold.

“Potential aggressors should be aware that the United States has the capacity to locate them and hold them accountable for actions that harm America or its interests,” Panetta told the gathering.

“The collective result of these kind of attacks could be a cyber Pearl Harbor,” Panetta claimed. “An attack that would cause physical destruction and the loss of life, an attack that would paralyze and shock the nation and create a new profound sense of vulnerability.

“Before September 11, 2001 the warning signs were there,” said Panetta. “We weren’t organized. We

weren’t ready. And we suffered terribly for that lack of attention. We cannot let that happen again. This is a pre-9/11 moment.”

While Panetta did not state that Iran had directly carried out the Shamoon cyber attack, he pointedly warned that the government in Tehran had “undertaken a concerted effort to use cyberspace to its advantage.”

James Lewis, a cyber security expert at the US Center for Strategic and International Studies, commented that the defense secretary’s speech “comes pretty close to sending a clear warning” to Iran. “I think the Iranians will put two and two together and realize he’s sending them a message.”

The glaring disconnect between Secretary Panetta’s blood-curdling language and the actual impact of the Shamoon computer virus—it apparently caused no reduction in either company’s production of oil and natural gas—can only be accounted for by understanding that the US political establishment is preparing its justifications for a war against Iran.

A discussion of the advanced preparations for a new round of US imperialist aggression in the Middle East has been excluded from the official election campaigns of both the Democratic and Republican parties.

During last week’s televised debate between Vice President Joe Biden and his Republican opponent Paul Ryan, Biden boasted about the tightening of US economic sanctions against Iran, while seeking to present Republican candidate Mitt Romney’s policy on the Middle East as too belligerent. The vice president asserted that the Obama administration only saw war against Iran as “the last resort.”

Panetta’s bellicose speech, which was given on the same night as the vice presidential debate, shows that the current Democratic administration, just as much as a prospective Republican one, is ruthlessly committed

to advancing US strategic interests through endless military provocations and wars.

Whatever cyber attacks the Iranian government may have had a hand in—and no evidence has been presented that Tehran had any involvement in the spreading of the Shamoon virus to Aramco and Rasgas computer systems—they cannot compare to the concerted campaign of cyber warfare and physical attacks carried out by the US government and its Israeli allies against Iranian government, military and scientific institutions and personnel.

In recent years, there have been frequent terrorist attacks against Iran, including explosions inside military bases and several assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists, which Tehran has blamed on Israeli and US intelligence agencies.

In June, the *New York Times* revealed that the Obama administration has accelerated a US cyber warfare program directed primarily against Iran. Dubbed “Operation Olympic Games,” the top-secret program was initiated during the Bush administration with the aim of developing and releasing viruses to impede or destroy the computer systems at Iran’s nuclear research facilities.

By 2010, the US had, in the words of former CIA chief Michael Hayden, “crossed the Rubicon” by launching a major cyber attack on Iran’s Natanz nuclear research plant using the Stuxnet virus. Despite an official US intelligence assessment that Tehran did not have an active nuclear weapons program, a senior US security official involved in Operation Olympic Games told the *Times* that President Obama ordered the attack against Iran.

The US cyber attack on the Iranian facility only became public knowledge after the virus escaped the system at Natanz and infected hundreds of thousands of computers across the world in the summer of 2010.

Despite the fact that Washington is the number one practitioner of cyber warfare in the world, Panetta presented an Orwellian scenario in which the US and its allies are the victims of an all-powerful Iranian threat.

The defense secretary told the gathering that the Pentagon is investing some \$3 billion per year on cyber warfare, including the development of a new centralized US Cyber Command. To put this in perspective, Pentagon spending on cyber war alone

amounts to 40 percent of Iran’s *total* military expenditure of \$7.5 billion for 2011.

Washington’s defense budget, plus separate expenditures on the US nuclear weapons arsenal – the biggest in the world – amounted to over \$750 billion last year. That is to say, the US government spends one hundred times more on its military than Iran, the country which Panetta absurdly claims represents an existential danger to the US and the world.

In addition to its own bloated military spending, Washington is fueling an arms race in the Middle East. The Pentagon and US defense contractors, such as those led by the executives assembled to hear Panetta speak in New York, have contracts to provide hundreds of billions of dollars worth of weaponry to allied regimes like Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Jordan, and Kuwait, all of which could become embroiled in a US-led war with Iran.



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